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James M. LaRossa, Defender of Mob Bosses in Court, Dies at 82

By **Douglas Martin**

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James M. LaRossa, who numbered himself among “the last of the gladiators” — his characterization of defense lawyers — and proved it in decades of spirited courtroom battles on behalf of mob bosses, politicians, labor leaders and judges, died on Wednesday at his home in Manhattan Beach, Calif. He was 82.

The cause was esophageal cancer, his daughter Susan LaRossa said.

In a career that included defending hundreds of white-collar criminals and establishing an important precedent of criminal law in the United States Supreme Court, Mr. LaRossa’s best-known cases involved Mafia chiefs. He represented Paul Castellano, boss of the Gambino crime family, after Mr. Castellano was indicted in 1985 with other heads of Mafia families charged with taking part in a so-called commission that ran organized crime in New York.

Mr. LaRossa met with Mr. Castellano on Dec. 16, 1985, shortly before he and an associate were murdered near the entrance of Sparks Steak House in Midtown Manhattan.

John Gotti, the infamous mobster, succeeded Mr. Castellano as the Gambino boss. In 1989, federal investigators taped a conversation that they said had revealed “that Gotti intended to ‘put out a feeler’ to Mr. LaRossa to act as co-counsel for him in his anticipated prosecution for murdering Castellano.”

In a letter to a judge, the investigators wrote that “if Mr. LaRossa refused, Gotti would kill him.”

When The New York Times asked Mr. LaRossa about this seemingly ominous remark in 1991, he said:

“There is no doubt in my mind this was meant as a joke and no more than that. He and I have known each other for 15 years, and he wouldn’t say anything like that about me other than in jest.”

Mr. LaRossa decided not to take the case when prosecutors told him he might be a witness because of his association with Mr. Castellano. He later represented Vincent Gigante, the boss of the Genovese family and a bitter rival of Mr. Gotti, in a 1996 racketeering and murder trial.

In an interview with People magazine in 1978, Mr. LaRossa said he did not mind defending someone he knew was guilty. “I’m not proving their innocence,” he said. “I’m attempting to stop the prosecution from proving their guilt.”

Among Mr. LaRossa’s many well-known cases was his defense in the mid-1970s of Judge Ross J. DiLorenzo of Civil Court, who was charged with perjury for denying he had tried to interfere with an investigation of corruption on the New York waterfront. He won the judge’s acquittal.

In 1979, Mr. LaRossa represented Anthony M. Scotto, the leader of the International Longshoremen's Association, who was charged with extorting \$200,000 from shipping companies. Mr. LaRossa enlisted two former mayors, John V. Lindsay and Robert F. Wagner Jr., and Gov. Hugh L. Carey to praise Mr. Scotto's character.

"He's a considerate, good family man," Mr. LaRossa said. "He's not a common thief and he shouldn't be treated as such."

Mr. Scotto was convicted of racketeering and sentenced to five years in prison.

In the 1980s, Mr. LaRossa twice defended Mario Biaggi, a Bronx congressman. The first case involved charges that Mr. Biaggi had accepted free vacations from the Brooklyn Democratic leader, Meade Esposito, in exchange for favors. Mr. Biaggi was convicted and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

The second case involved charges that Mr. Biaggi had accepted bribes for helping Wedtech, a Bronx defense contractor, get federal contracts. Mr. Biaggi was convicted of 15 counts of obstruction of justice and accepting illegal gifts and sentenced to eight years.

In 1971, Mr. LaRossa represented John Giglio, who had been convicted of passing forged money orders. Evidence emerged that the federal government had failed to disclose that one prosecutor promised a witness that he would not be charged if he testified against Mr. Giglio. But the prosecutor who tried the case did not know about the agreement, and thus could not inform Mr. LaRossa about it.

The United States Supreme Court reversed the conviction, establishing the precedent that a prosecutor's office must maintain a system ensuring that all lawyers in a prosecutor's office have access to all information about promises to witnesses.

James Michael LaRossa, the son of a mailman, was born in Brooklyn on Dec. 4, 1931. He graduated from Fordham University and its law school, and served in the Marines during the Korean War. He chose the legal profession, he once said, because if "you really worked, you could grow without the obvious family connections."

He worked for several years on the staff of the United States attorney in Manhattan, which he said was excellent experience for a defense lawyer. Despite his success in murder cases, Mr. LaRossa's preference was handling more complex cases against white-collar defendants.

In 1991, the New York State Bar Association named him outstanding criminal lawyer of the year.

Mr. LaRossa's marriages to the former Gayle Marino and the former Dominique Thall ended in divorce. In addition to his daughter Susan, he is survived by another daughter, Nancy LaRossa; two sons, James Jr. and Thomas; a sister, Dolores Nelson; and four grandchildren.

Mr. LaRossa had a commanding bass voice, and a sense of humor. In the Wedtech trial, he hammered away at a witness's bad memory. The witness then suggested there might be a memo of the conversation. Incredulous, Mr. LaRossa suggested that there might also be a rabbit where this memo lurked.

The prosecutor objected. "About the rabbit?" the judge asked. Yes, the prosecutor responded.

Mr. LaRossa said, "I withdraw the rabbit, your honor."

Correction: Oct. 21, 2014

An obituary on Saturday about the defense lawyer James M. LaRossa omitted one of his survivors. Besides two daughters, a sister, four grandchildren and his son Thomas, he is survived by another son, James Jr.

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